

NEWSIN brief

Start of Syria talks delayed one day

AFP, Astana
Talks on the Syrian crisis involving Russia, Iran and Turkey that were due to start in the Kazakh capital Astana yesterday have been delayed by one day, Kazakhstan's Foreign Ministry said without giving the reason. Syrian rebels have threatened this week to boycott the talks, accusing Russia of failing to get Damascus to comply fully with a ceasefire or take any confidence-building steps.

Lavrov to meet Tillerson today

AFP, Moscow
Russia's Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov plans to meet his US counterpart Rex Tillerson for the first time today in Germany, a foreign ministry spokeswoman said yesterday. Lavrov will also hold his first meeting with German Foreign Minister Sigmar Gabriel, who was appointed last month.

New UN peacekeeping chief named

AFP, United Nations
UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres on Tuesday announced the appointment of Jean-Pierre Lacroix of France to head UN peacekeeping for a year pending a review of the world body's functions and structure. Lacroix, 56, will replace Herve Ladsous who steps down in March after six years in the top job.

Knife attack in China's Xinjiang kills eight

AFP, Beijing
Eight people were killed in a knife attack on a crowd in China's restive Xinjiang region, including three assailants who were gunned down by police, local officials said yesterday. Ten other people were injured in the attack Tuesday evening in Pishan county. Police didn't specify the attackers but called them "rioters".



A woman who told police that she and her family were from Sudan is taken into custody by Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) officers after arriving by taxi and walking across the US-Canada border into Hemmingford, Quebec, Canada. Trump's immigration order has triggered panic in illegal immigrants in US. The picture was taken on Sunday.

PHOTO: REUTERS

US will not insist on two-state solution

AFP, Washington

President Donald Trump was set to welcome Israel's Benjamin Netanyahu to the White House yesterday after an administration official signaled a break with US support for a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The United States would no longer seek to dictate the terms of any eventual peace settlement, but would support what the two sides agree to together, a senior White House official said. "A two-state solution that doesn't bring peace is not a goal that anybody wants to achieve," the official said late Tuesday, speaking on condition of anonymity. "Peace is the goal, whether that comes in the form of a two-state solution if that's what the parties want, or something else if that's what the parties want." For the better part of half a century, successive US governments -- both Republican and Democrat -- have backed a two-state solution. It was the basis of peace talks at Oslo and Camp David. But since taking office in late January, Trump has sought to show that the United States is an unwavering ally of Israel and tried to draw a contrast with the policies of president Barack

Obama. In Ramallah, senior Palestinian official Hanan Ashrawi said that the change in US policy "does not make sense." "This is not a responsible policy and it does not serve the cause of peace," Ashrawi told AFP. "They cannot just say that without an alternative." UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres said that a two-state solution to the Israel-Palestinian conflict should be preserved, at a press conference in Cairo yesterday. Trump has yet to speak directly to the Palestinian leadership since taking office. Trump is expected to tell the Israeli prime minister that he hopes to help broker a solution to the conflict. He has already tapped son-in-law Jared Kushner and lawyer Jason Greenblatt to lead his peace drive. But major questions remain about how to achieve that goal. Netanyahu won re-election in 2015 by insisting he would not accept the creation of a Palestinian state, a vow that considerably soured relations with the Obama White House. Obama often warned that Israeli settlement construction could make a two-state solution impossible, and that a one state solution would put the future of the Jewish state in question.



Says official ahead of Trump-Netanyahu meet; Palestine, UN warn against move



ANTHEM-SINGING India sets new world record

AFP, Ahmedabad

Half a million Indians have set a new world record by performing a mass rendition of their national anthem, as patriotic sentiment rises under a nationalist government. The "Jana Gana Mana" anthem was sung by 509,261 people in Gujarat, the home state of Hindu nationalist Prime Minister Narendra Modi, at the opening of a Hindu temple, said Guinness World Records. The feat was accomplished in late January but only validated recently by Guinness World Records. It smashes the previous record of roughly 254,500 set in the Bangladesh capital Dhaka in 2014. "We feel very proud to have achieved this record, which is nearly double that of the previous record," Pareswara Gajera, chairman of the organising committee overseeing the stunt in the western state, told AFP.

Nato 'fundamental bedrock' for US

Says Defence Secretary Mattis as nervous allies seek reassurance

AFP, Brussels

US Defence Secretary James Mattis hailed Nato as the "fundamental bedrock" of transatlantic security yesterday as he sought to reassure allies about President Donald Trump's commitment to the alliance. Mattis, who has been on the job less than a month, spoke as a scandal over White House officials' ties to Russia gripped the Trump presidency and claimed the job of the national security adviser. "The alliance remains a fundamental bedrock for the United States and for all the transatlantic community, bonded as we are together," Mattis said as he met his counterparts in Brussels for the first time. "As President Trump has stated, he has strong support for Nato," said Mattis, a former Marine general who has himself previously served with Nato. Mattis however stressed that the Trump administration, like the Obama administration before it, expected Nato allies to boost their defence spending. "It's a fair demand that all who benefit from the best defence in the world carry their proportionate share of the necessary cost to defend freedom," he added. The 28-member organization is trying to portray unity after Trump's previous comments that the alliance was "obsolete." Since his inauguration, Trump has taken a more orthodox stance on Nato and reaffirmed long-standing US commitment to the alliance. Mattis has consistently voiced support for Nato and has



US Defence Minister James Mattis (L) and British Defence Minister Michael Fallon speak as they attend a Nato defence ministers' meeting at the NATO headquarters in Brussels, yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP

been tougher on Russia than his boss, whose views worry the alliance's eastern European member states in particular. Nato chief Stoltenberg insisted the Flynn scandal was not a further cause for concern for the alliance, which has underpinned transatlantic security since the aftermath of World War II. "I am absolutely certain that the message from this meeting will be a message of transatlantic unity," Stoltenberg said when asked about Flynn's resignation. Stoltenberg said the ministers will also stress "the importance that we stand together and protect each other and a very strong commitment of the United States to Nato." Mattis meanwhile praised the alliance for its enduring help for the United States in Afghanistan. "This has been the most successful alliance in military history," he said. Also hanging over the meeting was a New York Times report that Moscow had deployed a new cruise missile, raising fears it would violate the Intermediate Range Nuclear Forces Treaty (INF).

KILLING OF N KOREA LEADER'S HALF-BROTHER

Malaysia arrests woman

Seoul MPs say Kim Jong-Nam pleaded for his life

AFP, Kuala Lumpur

Malaysian police probing the killing of the half-brother of North Korea's leader arrested a woman yesterday as they tried to unravel a Cold War-style assassination the South said was carried out by Pyongyang's agents. As Seoul pointed the finger at poisoning female spies from North of their shared border, police in Kuala Lumpur said they were holding a woman with a Vietnamese passport. Her arrest came around 24 hours after news broke of the death of Kim Jong-Nam, the elder sibling of North Korean leader Kim Jong-Un, with reports saying female assassins had sprayed toxins in his face at Kuala Lumpur International Airport. CCTV images that emerged in Malaysian media, purportedly of one of the suspects, showed an Asian woman wearing a white top with the letters "LOL" emblazoned on the front. Malaysian police chief Khalid Abu Bakar said 28-year-old Doan Thi Huong was

arrested at the airport yesterday morning -- two days after the killing. Pathologists in the Malaysian capital examined the body for clues as to how he died. Meanwhile, Seoul's spy chief said yesterday Kim Jong-Un had pleaded for his life after an assassination attempt in 2012. Although Jong-Nam kept his distance from domestic politics, the North in 2012 tried to assassinate him, Seoul lawmakers said, following a closed-door briefing by the chief of the National Intelligence Service, Lee Byung-Ho. "According to (Lee)... there was one bid in 2012, and Jong-Nam in April 2012 sent a letter to Jong-Un saying 'Please spare me and my family'," Kim Byung-Ke, a member of the parliamentary intelligence committee, told reporters. His murder echoed the fate of his uncle Jang Song-Thaek, who was executed in Pyongyang in December 2013 for charges including treason and bribery.



Indian voters queue to cast their ballots in the ongoing state assembly elections in Bareilly in the state of Uttar Pradesh, yesterday. Millions of voters in India's most populous state continued to cast their ballots yesterday in a contest seen as a key test for Narendra Modi halfway through his first term as prime minister.

Disgraced Tamil leader sent to jail over graft

AFP, Chennai

Disgraced Indian politician VK Sasikala was jailed yesterday for corruption, just as she was on the cusp of becoming the leader of one of India's most prosperous states. Sasikala set off by car from her base in Chennai to Bangalore where she will serve her four-year sentence, a day after judges found her guilty of illegally amassing assets worth \$10 million. Flanked by scores of supporters, Sasikala first paid an emotional tribute at a memorial to her long-time mentor Jayalalitha Jayaram, Tamil Nadu state's long-serving chief minister and a co-accused in the case before she died in December. Sasikala could be seen pounding Jayalalitha's memorial with her palms and battling to hold back tears before being driven away in a SUV in the middle of a motorcade at the start of the 350-kilometre trip. Earlier in the day India's top court rejected a plea to allow her more time to surrender to authorities before beginning the sentence, which bans her from running for public office for a decade. The 59-year-old had been anointed as Jayalalitha's successor by the state's dominant party, All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam. It had been expected she would be sworn in later this week until Tuesday's bombshell verdict. The sentence brought a dramatic halt to the former video parlour saleswoman's meteoric rise up the political ranks. Sasikala had been involved in a bitter battle with acting chief minister, O Panneerselvam, who had been trying to block her ascent. But before Tuesday's ruling she appeared to have won enough support to be sworn in by the state assembly this week.

West Mosul bracing for worse

Residents say they are eating once a day as fighting looms

AFP, Arbil

As the noose tightens around holdout jihadists in west Mosul, so does the belt around the waists of hundreds of thousands of Iraqi civilians trapped there with dwindling supplies. "We're trying to build up some reserves but we have very little food left at home," said Umm Sameer, a mother from the Ras al-Jadda neighbourhood of west Mosul. After retaking eastern Mosul from the Islamic State group last month, Iraqi federal forces are now preparing to move on the part of the city that lies on the west bank of the Tigris River. All the bridges connecting the two sides have been dropped and the jihadists holed up in the west have nowhere to run to, setting the stage for what could be Iraq's bloodiest battle yet in the fight against IS. "We're already only eating once a day," said Umm Sameer. "The shelves are almost bare in the shops and when you do find something it's too expensive, like a kilo of onions which now costs 15,000 dinars (around \$12)," she said. Umm Sameer said 30 eggs fetched around \$50 and sugar

was impossible to find, a shortage that affects all households in a country where tea is consumed in large quantities and with abundant sugar. "People are so desperate that they are using sugar substitutes for diabetics to sweeten their tea," she said. The jihadist gunmen who have ruled the area for almost three years are growing more paranoid by the day as air strikes by the US-led coalition continue to target their hideouts, residents said. "(IS) members are raiding people's houses more often, looking for mobiles. If you have one, you face execution," said Abu Mohammed, who lives in the Al-Shafaa neighbourhood. He said some residents who had secretly kept a mobile phone since 2014 had recently destroyed their device. None of the residents contacted by AFP by phone would give their full names out of fear. Abu Mohammed said the only ones not to suffer from the food shortages were IS leaders, many of them foreigners, who still had access to some supplies from Syria.



WAR ON IS

4 suicide bombings hit Pak in a day; 6 killed

AFP, Peshawar

Four suicide bombers struck Pakistan in one day yesterday, killing six people and unnerving citizens whose growing sense of security has been shaken by multiple Taliban blasts this week. The latest assault happened in the northwestern city of Peshawar, said police, after a bomber rode a motorcycle into a van carrying several judges that was travelling through an upmarket neighbourhood. "It was a suicide attack," senior police official Sajjad Khan told AFP. Khan said the van driver was killed in the attack, which was claimed by the umbrella group Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP, or Pakistani Taliban). Five people -- including at least four judges, three of them female -- were injured, he added. Earlier in the day two suicide bombers launched an assault on a government compound in the Mohmand tribal region in the northwest, killing five people and wounding seven. One was shot dead before he could detonate the bomb while the other blew himself up at the gate of the compound, local officials said. Later, police said, another suicide bomber blew himself up when security forces surrounded him during a search operation in the area. The attacks came two days after a powerful suicide bombing rocked the Punjab provincial capital Lahore, killing at least 13 people and wounding dozens more. Also on Monday two members of a bomb disposal unit were killed in Quetta, the capital of restive Balochistan province, when a device they were defusing went off. It was unclear if the Quetta bomb was related to the other attacks. Jamaat-ul-Ahrar, a faction of the Pakistani Taliban, has claimed the attacks in Lahore and Mohmand. Last week the group vowed a fresh wave of assaults on government installations. Spokesman for both Jamaat-ul-Ahrar and the main TTP told AFP Wednesday the attacks would continue.